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Young people from St Rose of Lima Primary School

Poverty, attainment and wellbeing: Making a difference to the lives of children and young people

Research Brief Schools Focus May 2019

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Setting the Context

In Scotland, 2018 was designated the Year of Young People. Yet, we know that for many children living in poverty their life chances are significantly reduced, reflected in poorer mental health and wellbeing [1] and academic outcomes [2]. Focussing on attainment alone will not solve the problem: an holistic focus upon children and their wellbeing within the contexts of public policy, families, schools and communities is essential [3]. We have chosen to focus on early adolescence as this represents a critical stage in children's development [4, 5] when peer victimization [6] and mental health issues [7] often come to the fore, impacted by adverse childhood experiences [8, 9].

This is a complex international problem [10-12], articulated within the United Nation's global goals for sustainability [13], requiring a multi-disciplinary focus. The seminar series focussed on one of the Scottish Government's key policies – the Scottish Attainment Challenge, addressed through a wide range of legislation and initiatives [14, 15].

Through hosting a series of three international seminars (one held over two days) and working with children and young people in St Rose of Lima Primary School, Glasgow City Council and Inverclyde Academy, focussing on their sense of belonging to school, we have sought to cast light on this complex problem.

Programme Aims and Objectives

The seminar series sought to:

- Examine, through multiple disciplines and drawing upon the perspectives of academics, early adolescents, practitioners, the 3rd sector and policy makers, how the relationship between poverty, attainment and children's mental health and wellbeing is currently understood, particularly as it pertains to early adolescence, and how this understanding might be extended.
- Examine how a child's sense of belonging to school impacts upon their mental health and wellbeing and attainment.
- Enable new insights to inform international and national policy about how to address the attainment gap associated with poverty.
- Create lasting networks to foster partnership working and to create opportunities for future collaborative research.

Three International Seminars

The seminars systematically explored the relationships between poverty, attainment and children's mental health and wellbeing in order to understand the drivers of these relationships, lying at the intersection, as illustrated in figure 1. Seminar 1 explored the relationship between poverty and attainment; seminar 2 the relationship between poverty and the mental health and wellbeing of children; and seminar 3 examined the intersection between poverty, attainment and wellbeing with a specific focus on our sub-theme of a *sense of belonging to school*. The series concluded with a focus on Scottish educational policy and an exploration of the implications of what had been learned from the seminar series to inform public policy, children's services and schools.

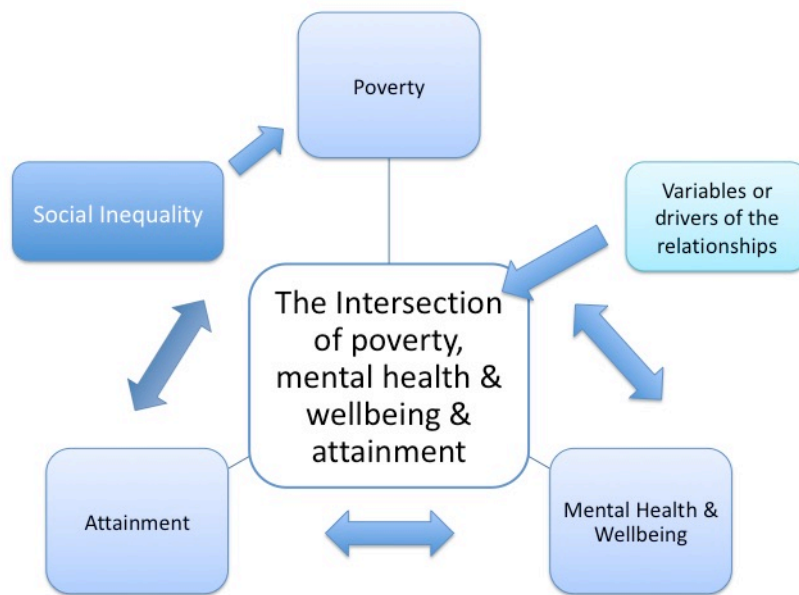


Figure 1: The relationships explored within the seminar series

Seminar 1: The Relationship between Poverty and Attainment



The scope of the problem is global and it is ever evolving [12]. Poverty is a structural issue but we *all* have a responsibility individually and collectively towards eradicating childhood poverty and mitigating against its impact. The Scottish Government's commitment to eradicating child poverty by 2030 through the Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill is to be welcomed but it is important to examine how different policies interact and can conflict with each other. Tackling the poverty-related attainment gap requires a multi-dimensional, inter-disciplinary and inter-sectoral solution and strong partnerships between schools, external agencies and parents [3, 16, 17]. A key priority is to further understanding of childhood poverty and its impact and to counter the myths and misconceptions which surround it [18]. It requires a focus not only on practical solutions to alleviate and mitigate against the impact of poverty in children's lives (such as exemplified through the 'Cost of the School Day' project) but a focus on

The quest to close the attainment gap cannot be solved by schools alone or schools in isolation of other public services [3, 16, 17]. It requires a political solution which places at its heart the drive to eradicate childhood poverty.

Start where you are and do what you can. Everyone can make a difference no matter how big or small. Getting this understanding out there is crucial. Every interaction with a child can make a difference.

We need to remove traditional barriers to address this problem – multidisciplinary / multi-sectoral partnership working is needed to address the complexity.

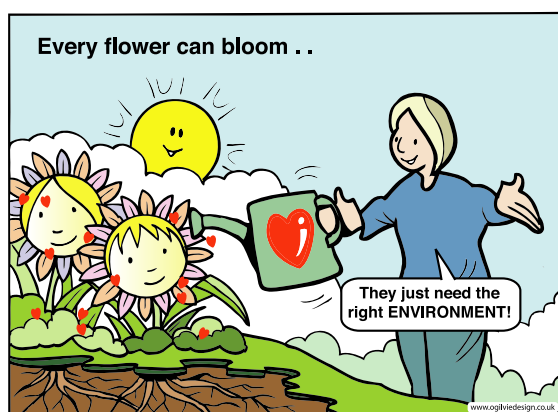
Deeper awareness of the depth and intricacies of children's poverty. Critical role of relationships in young peoples' lives and in the way those involved in poverty research, policy and practice engage.

Policy to support young

ethos and culture to tackle the stigma associated with poverty and develop empathy. An optimistic outlook is important. There is much sterling work going on in schools across Scotland but there is a need to ensure that finite resources are being spent wisely and judiciously and impact is sustainable. Ultimately, it is not about 'projects' and time-limited funding but about large-scale systemic change.

people needs to be long-term, funded for a long time, multi-disciplinary and research informed.

Seminar 2: The Relationship between Poverty and Mental Health and Wellbeing



mental health and levels of mental health difficulties get worse over the first 3 years of primary schooling [1]. Whilst recognising the importance of raising awareness of the impact of childhood trauma and ameliorating its impact, concerns were raised about the dangers of individualistic approaches which take insufficient account of the socio-cultural and political contexts which shape the experience of communities, families and children and which may be a critical factor in the production of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) [19]. A pro-active approach focussing on building resilient communities and fostering capabilities may be of greater value [20]. It may be summed up in the contribution of Sarah Ogdon, former headteacher at Pinkie Primary School, East Lothian, 'When a flower doesn't bloom you fix the environment, NOT the flower.'

Having a stable adult in the life of the child and a positive school ethos can help to reduce the impact of ACEs in children's lives and help them to develop resilience [9, 20]. These messages

The relationship between poverty and mental health and wellbeing is complex and we need to avoid over-simplistic solutions which may not do justice to the problem. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds start school with poorer

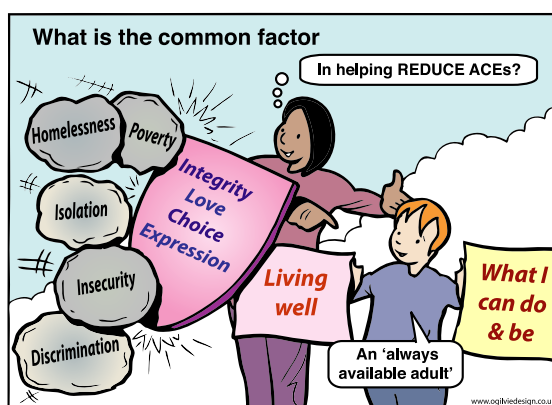
"Ten capabilities" are more helpful than ten ACEs to tick. We need to change school/ civic culture so that systems support positive relationships, individuals' sense of agency and community engagement.

It's complex and there are no easy answers. However, there is lots we can do individually and collectively to build capacity both at an individual and a community /societal level.

We need to give people (teachers) permission to do what they know is right, what is intuitive as they know their children/ families best.

Attainment cannot just be about academic success!

Whilst schools can – and are – playing an important role in "closing the gap", it must be at a societal level whereby universal agencies are adequately funded and in a position to work in collaboration with their communities



resonate also for the community that is the school, focussing on building strong social networks; strong infrastructures around schools (in terms of access to support services); strong relationships and fostering a sense of belonging in children and young people^[19]. How we relate to children, young people and families on a day-to-day basis matters. We need to aim for values-led practice, respecting and providing opportunities to build children's agency, fostering engagement and belonging within 'kind communities' and 'kind schools.'

Seminar 3: The Intersection of Poverty, Attainment and Mental Health and Wellbeing

Day 1: A sense of belonging

A sense of belonging to the school community is associated with a wide range of positive impacts relating to the mental health and wellbeing and ultimately attainment of children and young people [21]. This is aligned with fostering respectful and caring relationships within the school community based on positive emotions – happiness, love, care, understanding, kindness and connection. A focus on children's rights and our obligation towards them should be at the centre of what we do. Schools can provide a point of continuity and stability in children's lives [21]. Positive and supportive relationships with, and between, peers, teachers and families are key to feelings of school-belongingness during primary-secondary transitions [22].

Poverty and mental health feature prominently in the concerns of children and young people across the country. Poverty is dispersed across communities. We need to recognise the impact of rural poverty and the experience of children growing up in poverty in affluent areas [23]. There is a need to invest in age-appropriate and timely support in a suitable geographical location for children and young people with acute mental illness and to improve access to CAMHS^[24]. However, the key priority for most children and young people is universal services in schools and the community to support wellbeing. Having conversations with children and young people around mental health can reduce the stigma associated with mental illness.

Whilst recognising the quality of work across Scotland to address the poverty-related attainment gap and indicators of success, there is a great deal still to be achieved. This body of work needs to be understood within a broader framework of inequalities in society – the more unequal a society, the greater the social and health problems, with a range of indicators – health, education and life satisfaction - being poorer for children living in unequal societies [16, 17, 25, 26]. In particular, there are groups of children living in poverty who are particularly at risk of under-achievement – those living at the intersection of poverty, additional support needs and looked after children, accounting for one third of children in the lowest decile of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation [19].

and sectors.

(The) relationship between poverty-attainment-wellbeing is very complex and varies from child to child. But positive relationships, a sense of personal agency and a feeling of belonging will help every child reach their fullest potential.

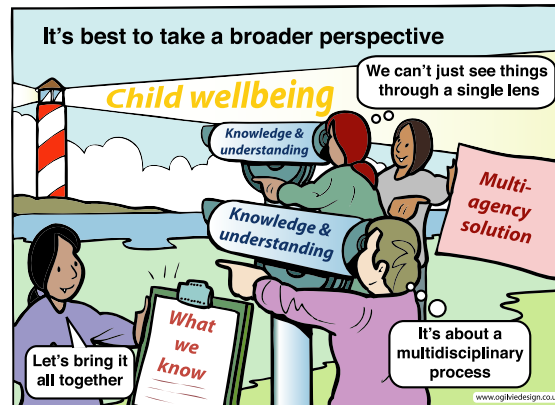
Ensure that wellbeing – in its widest sense – remains a priority alongside attainment.

Poverty is political. While professionals acting with kindness and respect will help mitigate its effects to some extent, in the end it will only be solved by redistribution of wealth.

Poverty is an enormous human rights issue – we won't fix the attainment gap without addressing inequality. We need to think of children, young people, their families and communities in the round - holistically.

Definitely look at how I can ensure some of the key messages can be

As previously intimated, the poverty-related attainment gap cannot be addressed by the efforts of schools alone. The problem requires a multi-disciplinary perspective and multi-agency solution. We need to



build strong networks of support around communities, families and schools and recognise that individual children can be disadvantaged and marginalised in multiple ways [3]. Therefore we need to focus on meeting individual needs, particularly for children most at risk of under-achievement. A key aspect of achieving this end is having a more holistic focus on children's education and achievements rather than focussing narrowly on attainment targets.

Day 2: Implications for Policy and Practice

To ensure that we put inclusion at the heart of 'closing the gap,' we need to build the knowledge base and dispositions of teachers and students/pupils and to reconsider the curriculum, pedagogy and the culture of the school in this light. This requires a different kind of knowledge to underpin teacher education and an examination of how funding and resources are allocated to build capacity within the system and do things differently[27].

According to Education Scotland, the next steps are to continue to build capacity in the system; improve and increase the sharing of practice; continue to ensure effective partnerships and build family engagement; ensure sustainability; and focus on rural and hidden poverty.

communicated with our teachers – both in terms of what they already do very well and also to consider how we can improve belongingness in our schools!

Think carefully about language. Challenge structural issues. Focus on small day to day activities and activities which make a difference – smiles, kindness, care and love.

Need to act and be 'fierce champions' for children and young people – we know lots about what we need to do and be to bring about change.

Empowering children and young people to have a voice in schools

Focus on wellbeing as route to attainment – not one or other

Families know their needs best – professionals need to really listen and there needs to be authentic engagement.

Key Insights

Understanding the Problem

Insight

The importance of furthering understanding of poverty and its impact on the lives of communities, families and children through a multi-disciplinary lens.

The attainment gap manifests itself before children commence formal schooling [28]. Disparities in mental health are in evidence when children enter primary school and magnify thereafter [1].

Implication

We require a multi-disciplinary perspective on the problem.

Investment in early years education should continue to be a national priority. Recognise the importance of play and play-centred pedagogy. Strengthen partnerships between home and school

The relationship between poverty, attainment and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) is complex.

One third of children in the lowest decile of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation also have Additional Support Needs (ASN) and/or are Looked After. Children with Social, Emotional and Behavioural Needs (SEBN) are significantly represented within this category [3, 29] but least likely to have a co-ordinated support plan [30].

and invest in services such as home-link workers.

Avoid over-simplistic solutions which individualise the problem (the answer being ‘make children more resilient’) and do not take account of the environment. A focus on nurturing capabilities may, in the long-term, be a more effective solution [20].

Universal provision is important but we need to direct targeted resources towards meeting the needs of children who intersect poverty, ASN and Looked After Children and who are multiply disadvantaged, particularly those with SEBN.

The Change Process, Impact and Sustainability

Insight

Significant investment has been invested by the Scottish Government through the Scottish Attainment Challenge. How do we know that the funding is utilised in such a way that it is building capacity within the system (rather than short-term fixes or compensating for cuts in services elsewhere) and that interventions are sustainable?

Given the significant investment of the Scottish Government, it is only right that there are checks and balances within the system. However, there is a need to balance autonomy with accountability.

There is much stellar work going on in schools to close the gap, supported by the dedicated team at Education Scotland, and indications of progress but it can appear to be over-whelming. This can give a sense of a lack of co-ordination and overview.

Implication

This is an appropriate point to take stock and evaluate interventions to ascertain impact and sustainability and set the future direction of policy.

Schools need to have sufficient autonomy to be able to set their own priorities and respond to local needs.

Build a coherent picture of practice. Disseminate good practice and impact. Tell the good news stories and celebrate success.

A collaborative approach

Insight

Schools cannot through their efforts alone solve the problem.

Impact is dependent on strengthening inter-professional, inter-sectoral and inter-agency links such that shared understandings and common goals emerge.

Implication

Build strong infrastructures and networks of support around communities, families and schools with access to age-related and appropriate services at time of need [3]. Invest in services such as CAMHS, educational psychology, speech therapy, counselling and home-link workers.

Create the spaces and opportunities for inter-professional, inter-sectoral and multi-agency work to take place.

Parents are central to closing the gap. Strengthening parental engagement in children's learning is a clear tenet of the Scottish Government's approach.

Continue to build effective partnerships with parents, strengthening parental engagement in their children's learning.

The need for research-informed practice

Insight

Public policy and practice to 'close the gap' needs to be research informed.

The dangers of being over-reliant on meta-studies derived from 'big data' which may tell us the 'what' but not the 'why' and may not be relevant to our own specific context or circumstances.

Higher Education has an important role to play in furthering understanding of the nature of the problem and its potential solutions. Also to strengthen opportunities for knowledge sharing which is multi-directional.

A skilled, reflective workforce with a rich understanding of the complexities of the problem and who have empathy towards children living in poverty is key.

The need to build capacity for research to inform practice within the system.

Implication

Invest in multi-disciplinary research and knowledge exchange to inform developments and evaluate the efficacy of interventions on the ground.

Recognise the value of smaller-scale mixed-methods or qualitative studies in building a research base and in informing practice.

Build partnerships with Higher Education to inform the direction of work and support it.

Invest in lifelong learning opportunities for professionals which cross disciplinary boundaries, are research informed and develop understanding of poverty and its impact on wellbeing and attainment.

Foster a research culture in schools through the championing and support for practitioner and pupil enquiry, supported by the HE community and Education Scotland working in collaboration with schools.

Support for families and building on the assets of the community

Insight

Poverty is a political choice. Schools cannot remove poverty but they can work with their communities to alleviate its impact and reduce stigma through their culture and actions.

Recognition of food poverty and the need to support families outwith normal school terms.

Recognise the power of communities and work respectfully with them.

We should not be working in isolation with children without involvement from families.

Implication

Poverty proof the school through interventions such as 'The Cost of the School Day.' Direct families to appropriate services and raise awareness of the impact of stigma on children and young people's lives.

Alleviate food poverty through initiatives such as breakfast and holiday clubs.

Listen to the voices of communities and recognise and build on their strengths. 'It takes a village ...'

Adopt an holistic approach when working with children and young people to meet their needs, involving their families.

Support for schools

Insight

Schools are committed to closing the gap. However, leadership teams and their staff are under increasing pressure from a multiplicity of (sometimes competing and contradictory) policies which make it very difficult to steer a clear path. Can schools be fully inclusive if success is measured by narrow attainment outcomes which take little account of the wider achievement of pupils and measure their attainment against somewhat arbitrary standards?

There can be a disjunct between policy rhetoric and reality.

Reflective and responsive practice is key.

Implication

Give greater consideration as to how we can recognise the wider achievements of children and remove barriers to inclusive schooling.

Recognise the professionalism of teachers and give credence to their voices and judgement.

Create the time and space within schools for teachers to be able to reflect on their practice and to build relationships with pupils, parents and colleagues. This may require consideration of pupil-teacher contact time and timetabling arrangements in schools.

School leadership, ethos and climate

Insight

A sense of belonging to school has emerged as a key variable impacting on a range of outcomes relating to pupil wellbeing and academic achievement [21].

Build capacity within the school.

There can be no meaningful, sustainable change without authentic engagement with parents and children.

Pupil wellbeing underpins achievement [21].

Whilst data is important to evaluate progress and inform future learning, ultimately the quest is about people and the quality of their lives. The data does not define the child and nor should labels.

Implication

Senior leadership teams need to foster a culture of trust: of respectful and affirming relationships within the school community in which all children are equally valued for who they are and there is no discrimination.

Provide opportunities and support for staff and pupils to exercise leadership across and beyond the school.

Parents and children need to be active agents in the change process and have a voice which is meaningful.

Reframe the narrative around poverty, attainment and wellbeing and prioritise health and wellbeing for all pupils – improved attainment will follow. ‘Better wellbeing – Better relationships – Better learning.’

Human relationships should be seen as pivotal in all that we do and the language that we use matters. Reflect this in the language of policy documentation but also in everyday encounters with children, young people and care-givers.

We can make a difference

Insight

Poverty is a structural issue but we can make a difference.

Everyday interactions with children and families make a difference.

The scale of the problem is significant. However an optimistic outlook is more likely to lead to success.

We all have a responsibility towards the welfare of children and young people.

Implication

We have individual and collective agency to make a difference at an individual and community/societal level to the lives of children and young people living in poverty.

Focus on happiness, love, care, understanding, listening, kindness and connection to ameliorate the negative impact of poverty in children and young people's lives.

Be optimistic in outlook and fierce champions of children and young people.

A rights agenda should underpin our work in closing the gap and inform all of our actions.

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